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## RESPONSE

# Ideas are not innovations?

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Kastelle and Steen have correctly identified some of the key issues in understanding systematic innovation as a process. Certainly, idea generation does not necessarily lead to innovation, and implementation requires a different set of disciplines. It needs to be seen as a separate exercise. Broadly speaking, I agree with many of their observations and the literature they have cited seems to support their hypotheses. The conclusions aspire to a greater understanding of what constitutes commonalities and practices that both hinder and encourage innovation as a process.

At the risk of being controversial, let me note that many of these observations (like much that is thought provoking) provide questions rather than answers. They do not offer an holistic view. I contend that we ought to be asking different questions about the notion of invention and innovation and the processes involved.

The idea that improving innovation comes, not through generating more ideas, but through implementing existing ideas more effectively is borne out in my own experience working with the research and technology part of Royal Dutch Shell. Generating ideas for the sake of generating ideas is not a good way to find the next innovation or invention. Incremental innovation comes about through looking at existing material. Counting patents, incidentally, is not a good way to monitor or measure innovation and its effectiveness. Ultimately, innovation in business is measured through commercial success.

Managing ideas to produce innovation is a better way to yield meaningful results. Brainstorming in the conventional way just produces a proliferation of ideas that lack clarity and are often dismissed as fanciful and a waste of time. This is because the process of idea generation is still based on outdated concepts whereby people throw ideas into a pot in various ways without consideration of either the problem or the conditions and mindset that will help solve the problem.

When asked what was the greatest obstacle he had to overcome in producing his theory of relativity, Einstein identified thinking how he might think about the problem was the most difficult part. In other words, he questioned the very nature

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of his thinking process. There is very little research that helps us to understand how we might create a model of innovative thinking that precedes the act of brainstorming. Our lack of preparation and pre-conceptualisation means we are not armed with sufficient resources. We have not even advanced far enough to replace the politically sensitive, brainstorming, with any meaningful alternatives. We have still not learned enough from the great masters of science about how their ways of thinking produced insights that paved the way for technological innovation and invention.

Einstein used to think in pictures, and would describe the act of creative thinking as non-verbal. If there is value in this, why is it we insist on verbalising ideas? That ideas must be always written down in a creative meeting disguises the essence of the experience and the importance of visual dialogue. Why not use video and sound as mediums for reflection and understanding? It is almost as if the experience itself has no bearing on the outcomes that arise from creative thinking. In my own experience, the very act of recording and reflecting gives insights that may otherwise be missed.

Einstein was interested in the psychology of creativity and innovation, as was another eminent scientist and mathematician, Henri Poincaré.

Poincaré was not accredited with the relativity theory, though historians have claimed that he came up with the theory at the same time as Einstein. On creativity, Poincaré said: 'It is by logic we prove, but it is by intuition we invent'. Poincaré also spoke of unconscious processing, or perhaps more aptly pre-conscious processing (Freud coined the term 'pre-conscious'). The unconscious is a misnomer in that it implies there is nothing happening – or perhaps little that we are aware of – except through dreams, etc. This highlights again that the words we use are outdated and possibly even irrelevant. Although our vocabulary continues to grow, it is inadequate as a means of producing innovation. We know through neurological research that a great deal is happening. In terms of creative thinking, these areas of research hold great promise.

Visualisation is a key element in problem solving, and it is little understood. When I conducted a series of workshops for scientists in Houston, we used visual imagery as a key component in understanding how we might go about solving problems and, perhaps more importantly, how we might reignite innate visual awareness. Many people need help to feel comfortable with the notion of free thinking through visual thinking and learning.

Ideas are ultimately about people and empowerment. Innovation itself can be described as a product that stems from creativity, and creativity needs room to breathe. At the same time, there needs to be a structure so that ideas can be channelled and evaluated. There is no point producing ideas to sit in an in-tray for months on end. If there were better preparation in creating a mindset conducive to innovating, there would be less need to create hundreds of ideas. Idea generation by the usual methods at best produces a consensus, but also frustration and a myriad of ideas that are soon forgotten. This is not even good for morale, let alone team building.

Managing innovation seems to me to be a process of corralling ideas rather than a process that might inspire the imagination. The prepared mind (especially in terms of visualisation) is the prelude to better decision making. These elements are sadly missing in much research. Psychological preparation is important if there is to be systematic innovation, and yet it tends to be peripheral to research on innovation.

Let us consider other options to researching innovation that are perhaps less pedestrian. We should take a more radical and innovative stance. What, for instance, if we were to reconsider our current predisposition to words as opposed to visual dialogue, or what it means to be a leader of innovation, or the collective intelligence that always arises from innovative thinking in teams? These should all feature much more highly in our research on how innovation works.